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THE UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURAL SCIENCES
AND VETERINARY MEDICINE OF THE BANAT TIMISOARA

The visit took place from Monday 14 June to Wednesday 16 June. The team was well received by the host university and given appropriate facilities and support.

A self evaluation document in English was provided and this gave a very full but uncritical description of the entire university. More information was in the annexes but these were written in Romanian and not translated so I could not read them in detail. There was ample description of the ambition of the institution, its strengths and its capacity but no detail was given about where the University wanted to concentrate its efforts or where it considered it could improve. There were no SMART objectives and it would be my first recommendation that the University should define a strategy over the next 5 years about where it wants to be in terms of research, teaching and international relations.

After the various protocols I met staff in charge of international relations. The University has a general desire to create new links, to increase its bilateral Erasmus agreements, but without any clear sense of direction – which universities or which countries? Most of the links result from visits of staff and relationships being formed. This is not unusual but it is not strategic action. There are links with neighbouring countries, especially Serbia and Moldova but other countries are hardly represented. In many European universities an operation like this would be run by professional administrators, not full-time academics who might be better employed teaching and researching – but this is no doubt a result of financial constraints rather than management choice.

The same is true for the work of the research office – the University has ambitions to increase its research visibility and it has performed well in recent years in very specialised areas – but again, this is something that in many universities would be organised by professional administrators. The University through its annual returns and its measure of staff performance is able to identify staff who are performing well and less well.

Particularly impressive is the quality management of the university. The university adheres closely to the Bologna guidelines and has in place an excellent system for the evaluation of staff and their teaching. Students play their part in quality management through generous representation on committees. This is one of the strengths of the university and is a model of good practice.

Meetings with past and present students were a little disappointing. While there were no complaints about the library or IT resources, and there was praise for the quality of teaching, there was considerable criticism of the practice periods when students undergo some form of professional practice. There are clearly major issues here and the University will need to consider them carefully. Also, and disappointingly, the meeting with graduates was a litany of complaints about the lack of experience that is provided by the curriculum – there is a sense that much of what they learned at the university was of little use to them in their professional careers. That said, all those who attended were in employment and they came in large numbers. The university would do well to use this human resource to look again at the curriculum. One possibility that exists elsewhere is to allow the students a credited year working in industry to get experience. The precise term

for this is 'sandwich' course. Typically a student would spend two years at college, one working outside, normally for a small salary, and a final year back in the college.

The team was able to visit the science laboratories associated with the various parts of the University. To my untrained eye, these seemed to be modern and fit for purpose, certainly of a standard sufficient for teaching, but I am not able to comment on the research potential of these installations. What I did notice, as an outsider, is the commendably high number of women working in the laboratories, not something that I have seen elsewhere.

We were able to visit a brand new student residence and saw facilities of the highest quality, a match to any I have ever seen. Obviously, these are the showpiece for the university and other older residences cannot match this high standard. The University is keen to increase its international profile and there is no doubt that residences such as this will help. At the same time, students from richer countries will not want to share a room with 3 or 4 other students when they have been used to single rooms in their own university, and this is no doubt having a negative effect on student exchanges, which remain very low for a specialised institution. The figure of 60 incoming students was mentioned.

I was able to visit two scientific areas during my visit: a farm where students are taught horticulture, the growth of flowers and vegetables. I was shown around by staff and by a very able PhD student who explained the operation and gave me a guided tour of the site. There are greenhouses ancient and modern, fields of culture and an impressive array of roses. There is potential here for income generation as excess produce can be sold commercially. I was introduced to a group of first-year students who were keen and enthusiastic and who had excellent language skills.

Later in the same morning I was taken to the site where fish farming is taking place and again I was able to see the work in operation, again very ably described by a range of PhD students. It is quite obvious that the language skills of the younger generation are often superior to those of their teachers. The raising of sturgeon and catfish was explained to me in detail and the experiments taking place there were detailed. The ambition, later, is to produce caviar and fish for the open market and this is clearly going to lead to income generation while, at the same time, leading to further research. Other features could follow: commercial management, marketing, advertising etc.. In short, both in the horticulture area and the fish raising area I was able to assess the quality of the environment and to meet students who were passionate about their subject. There is potential here for income generation and for collaborative ventures with other universities and with industry.

The meeting with students on the first meeting was a bit chaotic – about 100 students turned up and spent an hour in an extremely hot room. I asked if I could see a smaller group on the Tuesday afternoon for a more intimate discussion. This meeting was productive. It took place in the offices of the Extension Office which guides students in career choices and introduces them to the outside world. I had no time to investigate this further but the staff were enthusiastic and knowledgeable. The students too were highly enthusiastic and could find little to criticise in their university. Student representation is excellent, the student voice

is listened to, facilities are deemed good. They have no issues with any learning resources, excellent accommodation and support services, and responsive staff. Work submitted is returned promptly and there is ample time to discuss work with teachers. All this sounds excellent. The one thing they asked for, perhaps not surprisingly given the very hot weather during our visit, was a swimming pool!

A meeting that I requested with newly-appointed staff was less satisfactory. Staff entering the university are well supported by senior staff but they have so little money and so little money is allowed them that they are unable to go to academic conferences and unable, therefore, to mix with peers and improve their subject knowledge. If the University wants to raise its profile as a research institution it will have to find a way of supporting staff early in their careers. They need to mix with specialists on the international stage as they make their reputation and that of the University. They have to return an annual staff development form but this leads nowhere and they get no useful feedback. Clearly this is a situation that must be remedied. Staff improvement is vital for the well-being of any institution and morale amongst younger staff is clearly very low. They complained that there is an expectation that they spend 8 hours a day on the campus, even if they have no classes. Again, this is not sensible. Staff must be able to work at their research in the environment that best suits them. This could be in the library or even at home where they can work in peace and work without interruption. The University would do well to think about this requirement.

The meeting with Employers late on Tuesday afternoon was well attended and produced many of the same comments that we had heard already – the lack of applied knowledge of students graduating from the University and the difficulty experienced by students in adapting to the workplace.

The team was well received and staff were open and receptive throughout. Some of the buildings are starting to show their age and will need refurbishment when finances permit – lecture theatres could do with state of the art resources and the library, although staffed by clearly dedicated personnel, is old fashioned and dusty. At the meeting with students we were told that only about 20% of students actually use the library as others prefer electronic resources. It is surprising that there is no library-user survey to judge opinion and to prepare for the future.

I was impressed by a university where the student experience is high. The principles of the Bologna process are clearly adhered to (and indeed criticised by some students) and this is a positive evolution as the University situates itself in a European environment. It needs to develop a much more strategic attitude in the way it moves forwards, defining objectives and targets and giving a time scale for each objective. It needs to think carefully about itself. Where will it be in 5 years time? how will it be funded and what solutions will it find to a funding crisis? How will it manage its staff? Will it attempt to bring in top class researchers from other universities to raise the research profile of the university and to create significant links for the future? It will need to undertake a gradual refurbishment of some of its building stock when funds allow.

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